

**WHAT CALIFORNIANS THINK  
ABOUT PRESCHOOL:  
A STATEWIDE SURVEY OF ATTITUDES**

***CONDUCTED ON BEHALF OF***

***FIRST 5 CALIFORNIA***

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Between December 10 and 18, 2003, Peter D. Hart Research Associates surveyed a representative cross section of 1,317 adult residents of California. Two central findings emerge from the results of this research.

- First, the public displays a broad and consistent recognition of the importance of quality preschool programs.
- Second, a widely held view exists that California is doing too little to provide children with opportunities to attend quality preschool programs before they start kindergarten.

These attitudes lead Californians to favor action to improve access to quality preschool. For example, two-thirds of the state's residents agree that "making quality preschool available to all is an important priority for California to address now, in part because getting young children ready to learn will help improve the success of K-through-twelve education."

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF PRESCHOOL**

This survey assessed Californians' perceptions of preschool from a variety of perspectives. In each instance, adults place a high priority on access to quality preschool, both as a critical need in the lives of young children and as a valuable goal for the state as a whole.

Early education ranks at the top of Californians' priorities when they are asked to volunteer the most important things the state should be doing to help meet the needs of children ages zero to five. Overall, the most-frequently volunteered responses relate to preschool and early education, mentioned without prompting by three in 10 residents. After preschool, the next most-often volunteered priority for meeting the needs of young children are health care (21%) and child care (18%).

<b>VOLUNTEERED MOST IMPORTANT NEEDS/CHALLENGES IN CALIFORNIA FOR CHILDREN AGES 0-5</b>	
Education, preschool programs, Head Start classes	29%
Better health care/prenatal care, vaccines	21%
Daycare, better/more affordable child care	18%
Parenting classes, how to care for children	7%
Proper nourishment	6%

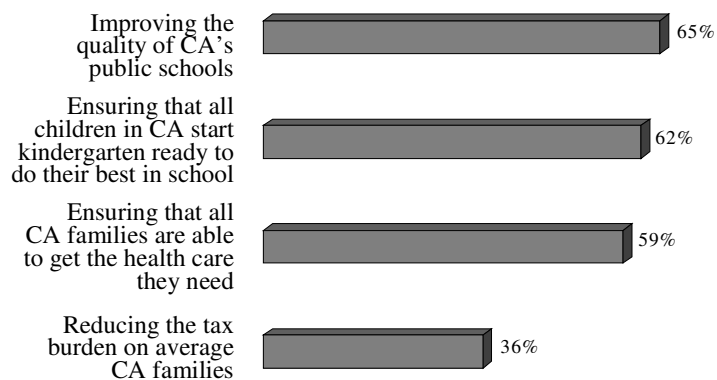
Adults were asked to rate the importance of various goals for California, using a scale from zero (not important) to 100 (very important). On this scale, scores higher than 80 are grouped together as an indication that Californians assign a high level of importance to a goal.

Many polls have shown the high degree of importance that residents attach to improving K-through-12 education and health care. This survey's results show that a similar share of Californians put the issue of school readiness for young children on an equal plane with those well-established priorities.

Statewide, 62% of residents rate “ensuring that all children in California start kindergarten ready to do their best in school” as being highly important. This response about school readiness is comparable to the responses for such high-profile issues as “improving the quality of California’s public schools” (65% highly important) and “ensuring that all California families are able to get the health care they need” (59%). A larger proportion of Californians give a higher rating to school readiness than to “reducing the tax burden on average California families” (36%).

## Californians Rank School Readiness As Highly Important

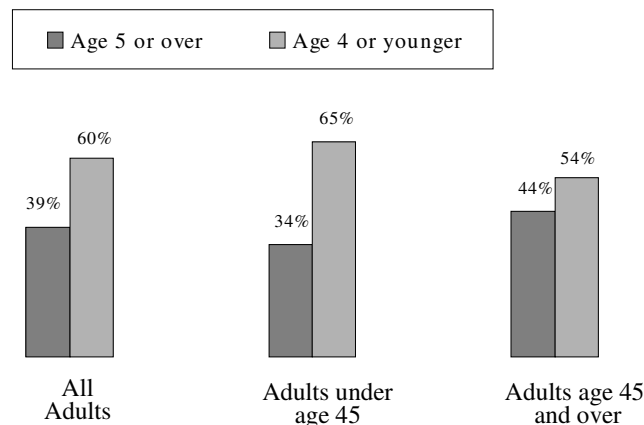
*(ratings of 81 to 100 on scale of 0- 100)*



The public's understanding of the value of early education is reflected in that most Californians now say that they would redesign the state's approach to schooling by offering organized education to all children on a voluntary basis at an earlier age than is currently the case. When asked to say at what age the state should offer organized education to all, 39% of

residents choose age five or older (the status quo), but 60% think that the state should make some form of organized education available to all children at age four or younger. Majorities of all age groups select age four or younger as the age that state-provided education should start, including 65% of residents under age 45 and 54% of those age 45 and over.

## At What Age Should The State Offer Organized Education?



Along with this view of when organized education should begin, the findings document a significant consensus that has developed about the important value of preschool education for a child, even when the option is available of having the child stay home full time with a parent. By 64% to 32%, Californians reject the contention that “it is better for children to stay at home with a parent full time rather than go to preschool.” Significant majorities of every key demographic subgroup disagree with this position, including both parents of young children and those who do not have young children in their household.

Perhaps the most personal and compelling reflection of the importance of preschool comes from the responses of parents about what they want for their own children. Fully 83% of parents of children age four and under say that they would enroll their child if free, voluntary preschool for four-year-olds were available; 72% of parents with children between the ages of five and 12 say that they would have enrolled their children if such programs had been available when their kids were four.

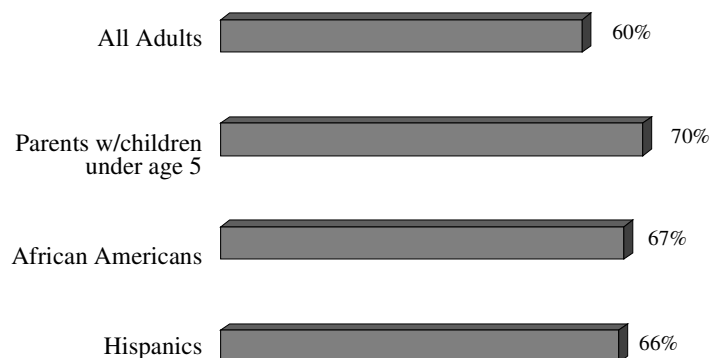
## THE INADEQUACY OF THE STATUS QUO

Although parents overwhelmingly want quality preschool for their children, many of them say that it is hard to come by in California today, particularly because of the high cost of good programs. These parents, along with the majority of state residents, say that California should be doing more to provide opportunities for children to attend quality preschool programs before they begin kindergarten.

Californians are aware that access to quality preschool programs is far from universal in the state today. Indeed, 60% say that only half or fewer of all parents have access to these programs. (These assessments are remarkably accurate: according to a recent study, only 47% of children in the appropriate age groups are currently enrolled in preschool or child care in California.) This view that many parents lack access to quality, affordable preschool is especially widespread among Hispanics and African Americans, with two-thirds of both groups saying that only half or fewer of parents have access to these programs for their children. The most negative view, however, is expressed by precisely those parents who are most likely to be exposed to real-world experiences involving preschool, as fully seven in 10 parents who have children under age five agree that only half or fewer of parents have access to quality, affordable preschool.

### Lack of Access to Quality Preschool is Seen as Common

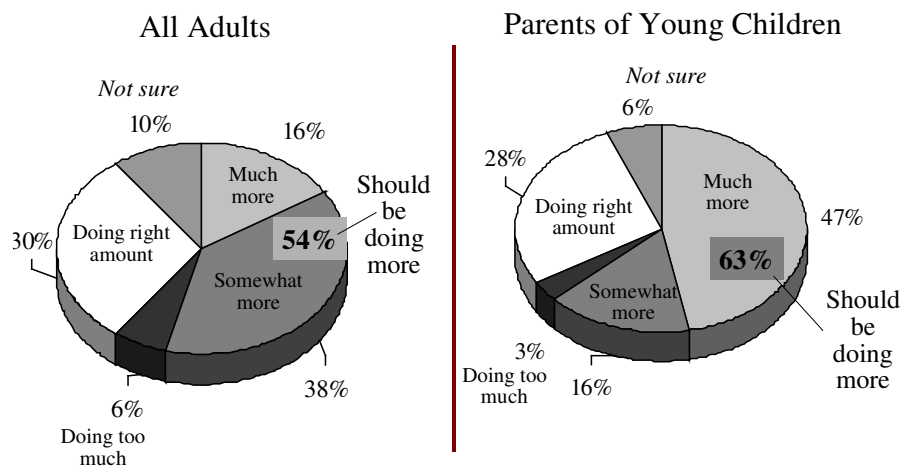
*% saying half or fewer parents have access to quality pre-school/pre-k*



When asked to identify the biggest obstacles that parents face in finding quality preschool programs, it is not surprising that Californians focus most often on the fact that “many of these programs are too expensive” (45%); this is the top reason selected by every ethnic group. Hispanics also are more likely than others to say that “there is not enough information available to parents about how to find these programs” (27% Hispanics, 20% all adults).

Most significant is that a majority of Californians believe that the state is not doing enough to ensure that children have the opportunity to attend quality preschool programs. Statewide, 54% think that California should be doing more to provide opportunities for children to attend quality preschool programs before they begin kindergarten, whereas 36% feel that the state is doing the right amount (30%) or too much (6%) in this regard. The view that the state is falling short in meeting the need for affordable, quality preschool is particular pronounced among the parents of young children, 63% of whom believe that the state is doing too little to provide access to quality preschool.

### Most Say CA Should Be Doing More to Provide Opportunities for Children to Attend Preschool



The public's desire to change the status quo with regard to the availability of quality preschool overrides any tendency to believe that the state should focus first on fixing the current public school system. Indeed, Californians say that making quality preschool more widely available is a means of improving the rest of the public education system; it is not a conflicting

priority. When given the choice between two statements on this subject, fully 67% of adults side with the view that “making pre-kindergarten available to all children is an important priority for California to address now, in part because getting young children ready to learn will help improve the success of K-through-12 education.” By contrast, just 30% agree that “California should not take on a major new responsibility for making pre-kindergarten available to all children until it does a better job of meeting the responsibility it already has for K-through-12 education.” More than 80% of both Hispanics and African Americans say that pre-k is an important priority now; whites choose this side of the argument by 56% to 40%.

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**WHICH STATEMENT DO YOU AGREE WITH MORE?**

**Statement A:** California should NOT take on the major new responsibility for making pre-kindergarten available to all children until it does a better job of meeting the responsibility that it already has for K-through-twelve education. OR

**Statement B:** Making pre-kindergarten available to all children is an important priority for California to address now, in part because getting young children ready to learn will help improve the success of K-through-twelve education.

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	<b><u>All Adults</u></b>	<b><u>Whites</u></b>	<b><u>Hispanics</u></b>	<b><u>African Americans</u></b>
California should NOT take on new responsibilities	30	40	16	17
Making pre-kindergarten available to all children is an important priority	67	56	83	82

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**METHODOLOGICAL NOTE:** A survey with a sample of this size has a statistical margin of error associated with it of plus or minus 3 percent, at the 95 percent confidence level. The sample for this survey was constructed to include oversamples (additional interviews) of African Americans and Spanish-speaking Latinos; these oversamples are accounted for by a weighting procedure that ensures that the final weighted sample accurately represents the actual population distribution in the state.